A MATTER OF IDENTITY
Communion Meditation - Lent
Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7
Romans 5:12-19
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It was only several years ago that the most fashionable affliction one could sport was an "identity crisis." An identity crisis is what you have when you wake up one morning, look in the mirror, and ask, "Who am I?" - and don't know the answer. A severe identity crisis is what you have when you crawl back in bed and stay there for two weeks, or instead of shaving and showering and going to the office, you dawn blue jeans, buy a motorcycle and hit the road.

It was only several years ago that "Who Am I?" was the "in" question. I have a cousin who at the time was in the process of graduating, cum laude, from Yale University. She was a drop-out from church youth groups, however. When I asked her why, she answered in a way I haven't forgotten. She said, ("I've gone to enough meetings and talked about who I am for the rest of my life!")

Perhaps we overdid it. Perhaps our concentrated concern served to loosen rather than firm our sense of identity. The question, however, remains a live and important one. Erik Erikson taught that establishing one's identity, one's sense of selfhood, is the most important task of adolescense. In adolescent years the healthy, growing individual learns who he or she is. It is not, however, a simple matter of individual identity. Rather, the self is affirmed in relationship: the individual emerges in the midst of a family, parents, brothers and sisters, community, church, nation. I made light of the

whole question initially. But we are discoveri ng again that in middle age, for instance, for many people, the job has not yet been accomplished: the search for identity may go on for a very long time.

insert D.B. →

Dante wrote, "In the middle of our life I find myself in a dark wood." And Gail Sheehy wrote a best seller under the title Passages which describes the now famous mid-life identity crisis in such universal terms that happy readers report feeling inadequate and guilty because that they have not yet had one.

A sense of identity is fundamental to mental and spiritual health. Establishing that identity is one of the life-long tasks which confronts every one of us. David Willis suggests that advertising caters directly to our hunger for identity,

"We are told that the real you is a blonde, or a brunette, or whatever you are not now. All you have to do to become the polychrome you, is to 'do it'. If you do it with the right product, no one will know whether or not you do it. If you are still the same old you, try serving and drinking the right potion. You will know you have 'arrived' if a particular brand of brew is being consumed at a party to which you are invited. When you travel, be forwarned that successful people are to be found on this or that flying carpet. These carpets 'make the going great,' are the 'friendliest;' 'move their tails for you,' or are equipped with attendants whom you can 'fly daily' to Houston if you wish...

"The basic need for identity on which these ads play is a need to be assured that you are worth something, that you are of some significance and beauty, that you are not just lost -

and if we should get lost, someone will at least notice." (David Willis, Daring Prayer, p. 30)

Visitors to our culture seem to notice almost immediately the tendency of American people to avoid aloneness at any cost. Henri Nouwen, Dutch Roman Catholic Theologian suggests that we are not comfortable with ourselves: that we need chatter, people, muzak , to fill the silence in order to prevent simple communication with one's self. The reason, he suggests, is that we are not really sure who we are.

Our identity is established, more often than not, within a story. It's important, for instance, to tell our children stories from their infancy: how it was when they were born, what we did together when they were babies. And even ~~through~~ though they've heard it all before it's important to tell it again: for everytime they hear the story they recognize themselves in it, and know, more deeply, who they are. That, of course, was the power of ~~[illegible]~~ the whole Roots phenomenon. Who will ever forget that moment in the epilogue of the book, when Haley after has traced his ancestors to a remote village in Gambia, and hears, for the first time, the story of Kunta Kinte, the boy who went into the woods one day to carve a drum and never returned? That, of course, was Haley's ancestor. And he testified, that for the first time in his life he knew and rejoiced in who he was.

We find ourselves somewhere in a story: we recognize ourselves in the characters we already know very well. In an essay On Stories, C. S. Lewis observed that children love to

delightful

have stories re-read in the same words as before. "They want to have again the 'surprise' of discovering that what seemed Little-Red-Riding Hood's grandmother is really the wolf. It is better when you know it is coming..." (see Willis, op.cit, p. 30-31

The Christian faith, and the Jewish tradition behind it, answers the existential question, "Who am I?" by telling a story - or a series of stories. That is why we preserve, and read and reread the tale of an unlikely tribe of semites wandering around in the wilderness for forty years, and building their nation, and the even more unlikely stories of their heroes, prophets, generals and kings. Somewhere in those stories, Christianity suggests, we find out who we are. And it originates in the primal story, an historical vignette from the time when there was no history. Whether or not it is literal history is not and never has been the point. The point is what it says about the human condition and whether or not you and I recognize ourselves in the story.

So - think with me about our story, as it was read earlier from the Book of Genesis...

Once upon a time God made us from the dust and clay and dirt of the ground. The important thing is not the material but the assertion that He fashioned us, molded us, made us to be what we are. He breathed into us his own life, the divine breath. And he placed us in Eden, which in Hebrew means simply a delightful place: where the trees were pretty and the fruit very tasty. He gave us one another for company and we walked around in that delightful place in innocence, and the only condition he placed on the arrangement was that we

[redacted] obey a few simple rules the essence of which was the acknowledgement that he is God, the Lord of the place.

But the more we thought about it the less we could understand why he insisted on his prerogative; why we couldn't own the place. And so we broke the rule and pushed him out of his own garden. And we knew intuitively that our pride had broken the precious relationship between our creator and ourselves and suddenly we felt very funny about one another. We were ashamed and embarrassed and covered our nakedness and lost our original innocence. God was disappointed by the way we chose to use our freedom: Eden was no longer possible: now we would be responsible for ourselves. But even in his deep disappointment God did not abandon us. Even as he was driving us out of Eden, out into our world, he fashioned clothing out of skins for our comfort and safety. His love and compassion followed us east of Eden into our world and our history.

[redacted]. Do you recognize yourself in that story? The poets and artists and novelist have seen us clearly here. The Biblical writers maintain that the whole human condition is included in the Genesis story. Adam means man - humanity: our alienation from God is a corporate thing as well as personal. We are separated from our ~~true identity~~ creator + from one another + from ourselves. But - the Christian faith maintains - something has happened that makes all the difference in the world. There is another chapter...

Listen to another writer, several decades after the fact, trying to put it in words:

"Therefore as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin:... ~~as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men~~, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men." (Romans 5:12, 18) Things are different now, Paul announced. The situation is changed. God has done something equally as important as his original creation. He has sent another man, another Adam to close the gap and end the alienation. ~~This Adam not eat the apple. This man chose not to live in God's world. To be what we were created to be.~~ Now life is possible again: that which is broken may be put together and healed and made whole.

Do you find yourself there, too? We are many people. Our identities are diverse. We are husbands, wives, sons, daughters: we are lawyers, doctors, teachers, homemakers, businessmen, nurses; we are Repuclican, Democrats. We are Americans: we are human beings living for a relatively brief span of time on the planet earth.

But simultaneously and

~~And~~ beneath all of that we are creatures of God himself: who separate ourselves from our true identity by pride and willfulness and stubornness. We are creatures of need: beneath all our temporary identies we are children without a parent, w/o a home without a name. We need someone to love us and tell us who we are and follow us through life. and welcome us back home again.

Who am I? Who are you? We are the ones for whom Jesus Christ lived and died. ~~David Wilkie writes: "The great liturgies of the church are sacraments of the sacred story, and our participation in them is one of the principal ways by which~~

Bonhoeffer ended his poem which I read earlier — "Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!"

~~share in the story and reinforce our God-given identity."~~

~~(op. cit. p. 34)~~

Lent is the time to tell the story again: as the old Gospel hymn puts it: ("the story of Jesus and his love.") It is the time to reflect deeply about who we are ~~to get in touch with our roots:~~ Lent is the time to acknowledge our need and to embrace the very Good News that in Jesus Christ God has loved us, and given us life, and welcomed us back into his family: ~~and told us that life~~ that though our identity may be fragile, we remain - a person for whom Jesus Christ laid down his life.

(#) to acknowledge that sometimes we don't know - & confess that we feel pulled - pressed & fragmented by the many persons we must be as

And the journey of Lent begins, appropriately enough, here, as a family sits down to eat a meal. And someone says, ("tell the story") and another responds:

"The Lord Jesus, on the night of his arrest, took bread, and after giving thanks to God, broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you: do this remembering me.'

And in the same way, he took the cup and said, 'This is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this, remembering me.'"

Amen.

God our faith - in this Lent Season - show us again who we are. Startle us w/ your love: open our hearts to the story of a Lord who loves us - even unto death on the cross .. I.P. our Lord. A—

9:00 - off